

Recognizing and Coping With Caregiver Burnout

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Caregivers, individuals who care for the physical and/or psychological needs of others, often fail to recognize and meet their own needs. Being focused on tending to the day-to-day needs of others can cause one to ignore their own personal and emotional well-being. This is often a major factor that contributes to stress and other problems associated with caregiver burnout.

In his article, *Preventing Caregiver Burnout*, Dr. James R. Sherman states, "Caregiver burnout is a state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion that may be accompanied by a change in attitude — from positive caring to negative and apathetic." Studies by the Family Caregivers Alliance have shown that caregiving compromises health with approximately sixty percent of caregivers being clinically depressed.

Recognizing the Signs

The most apparent signs of burnout are increased stress and feelings of depression. Learning to recognize these signs of burnout will enable caregivers to take preventive measures to maintain their own health and well-being.

Other warning signs and symptoms of caregiver burnout often include:

- No longer participating in activities once enjoyed
- Withdrawing from friends and family

- Denial about the severity and outcome of their family member's disability/disease
- Changes in appetite, weight or both
- Changes in sleeping patterns
- Getting upset more quickly than normal
- Feeling blue, irritable, hopeless and helpless
- Getting sick more often
- Lack of concentration, even with simple everyday tasks
- Increased anxiety

Caregiver burnout is not the result of a single event but rather a combination of circumstances, experiences and responses. The many round-the-clock physical and emotional demands of caring for another can end up taking a heavy toll on both your body and mind. Dealing with caregiver burdens is not an act of selfishness. It actually helps the person you care for because you will become a more patient and effective caregiver.

Coping Strategies

The following suggestions can often assist caregivers in coping with burnout:



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Recognize warning signs early: Don't wait until you are overwhelmed. It is important to take even the small signs of emotional distress seriously.

Make time for yourself: As hard as it may seem this is essential to your emotional and physical well-being. Set aside some time each day for yourself (go for a walk, retreat to your favorite place, visit with a friend). All caregivers need time away, whether it's 30 minutes or several hours.

Set your own goals: You should decide what you can and can't do. Set priorities, break large tasks into small ones, be realistic and know you cannot do everything.

Attend to your own healthcare needs: Your general physical well-being affects your outlook and ability to cope. Eat proper meals, exercise, see your own physician for help.

Become an educated caregiver: Learn as much as you can about your family member's illness/disease. Learn what to expect. Once you know what to expect, you'll be able to manage the present and plan for the future.

Ask for and accept help: Many caregivers are reluctant to ask for or accept help from others. Trying to do everything yourself will leave you exhausted. The support of family, friends and community resources can be an enormous help. Know your limitations. Make a list of small tasks someone could help you with, such as picking up a prescription or going to the grocery store.

Talk with someone about your feelings: Do not keep your emotions inside. Develop a support system. If you become overwhelmed seek professional help.

Learn to communicate effectively with your physician: Make a list of the most important concerns and problems. Keep a log to assist you as well as the physician (changes in symptoms, medications, special needs, etc.).

Resources for Caregivers

There are many services and resources that can offer caregivers assistance or relief, and can provide needed services to their family member. Contact your local Area Agency on Aging, human services agencies or local hospitals for information and assistance. The following resources may be available in your area:

Caregiver Support Groups: Support groups can help you regain your inner strength, meet other people coping with similar dilemmas, and find out about additional resources and information. Participating in a support group can also help manage stress, enable you to exchange experiences and improve your skills as a caregiver.

Home Delivered Meals: Some areas have a "meals on wheels" program which delivers meals to those who are unable to leave their home.

Home Health Services: These agencies provide home health aides, in-home physical therapy, and nursing care (as necessary). Personal care services such as dressing and bathing are often provided. These services may be covered by health insurance if ordered by a physician.

Adult Day Care: These programs offer an individual with a disability a place to socialize, engage in a variety of activities and also give the caregiver some respite. Meals are provided and often, medical services are available.

Homemaker Services: Services provided by non-medical personnel often include shopping, laundry, light cleaning, and preparation of meals. Homemaker Services can often provide family caregivers a much needed break.

Information for Caregivers:

Each of these agencies have many resources, fact sheets, publications, newsletters and information to assist caregivers in areas such as: nutrition, stress, medications, and also includes other helpful caregiver tips.

RECOGNIZING AND COPING WITH CAREGIVER BURNOUT: P. Rogers

National Family Caregivers Association

www.nfcacares.org

1-800-896-3650

Family Caregivers Alliance

www.caregiver.org

1-800-445-8106

Eldercare Network

www.caregivers.com

1-888-405-4242

National Alliance for Caregiving

www.caregiving.org

1-800-227-7294

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